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IS COMEDY FREE ?

Somewhere in the circle of drama there is a region that is pure comedy. Though aristocratic, this section is not exclusive: it has very close neighbors, and puts no sharp fences around its domain. In its neighborhood Polonius can find "pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral . . . tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" to his heart's content. Near it dwell comedy romantic, comedy sentimental, comedy whining, tragedy mediated. It is fringed by *bourgeois* upstarts: melodrama, where Prussian villainy does its bloody deeds; and farce, where exaggerated grotesques are bandied about to make a merry holiday. But always one comes back to its pleasant, finished spaces. There not Providence, but Mrs. Grundy, is offended. There no struggle goes on between human desire and divine justice, but only a jostling, amid kindly laughter, of whims, perversities, and temperaments. There Millamant awaits her lovers; rich Uncle Noll his nephews; Falstaff his Mistress Ford. There one is sure, no skeletons are to be rattled in the closets, no hearses are expected at the doors.

This happy region, with its Aristophanes, its Plautus, its Terence, its Molière, its Jonson, its Congreve, its Sheridan, is supposedly the home of informality, of freedom. Some long-faced visitors have even thrown up their hands, exclaiming that, in comedy, there is no form, that the law is the law of "wildest license". No Freytag has categorically drawn up its rules of conduct; it is not supposed to have to rise to a climax, or fall to a catastrophe, or have to give its hero one flaw, one strain o' the stuff. Its heroes are full of flaws. Its Tonies drink and smoke and lie and take their mothers on wild-goose rides "over the stones of Up-and-Down Hill". Its Charles Surfaces gamble and drink and love and sell their family heirlooms for a song. Its Falstaffs scheme the betrayal of honest wives in whole-souled joy. Here at least there is liberty from rigid law and moral obligation and regularity and Freytagian formula.

But is there? *Is* comedy free?

Alas for the hope of liberty, and for the wings that would lift us above the thousand '*verbodens*' that flesh is heir to! Perhaps

the "wildest license" of comedy is a pleasing fiction; perhaps the pranks of Tony, the auction-sales of Charles, the *liaisons* of Sir John, do not spring full-grown from joy; perhaps the comic muse, too, is shackled in necessary chains. She, like the rest, has to bow to the law that governs the whole circle of drama,—the law of interest and conflict? It may be smoothly disguised; it may, like a well-administered government, give seeming liberty and genteel ease to its subjects, its Molière, its Congreve, but none the less it rules them.

Being perhaps a bit too sensitive to law, I am apt to fall into a prying mood as I sit in some modern quarter of this comic region, say in *Pomander Walk*, and between the acts to pounce upon my companion, hoping that his chance thought may prove grist to my mill. "What are you thinking about?" I ask. When he tells me that he is chuckling about that old fellow sitting at the window, he is my man. And if, when I ask him the same question at a more serious play, say *The Great Divide*, he tells me that he is wondering how the abyss between Stephen and Ruth can possibly be bridged in the next act, he is playing into my hands. Indeed, I suppose that nine times out of ten he, this multiple companion, has told me, when the play was serious, that he was thinking of its future course, and when it was light that he was enjoying, in memory, its past action. If I could have sat beside Samuel Pepys when he was "mightily pleased" with Betterton's Hamlet, "the best part I believe that ever man acted", he might have whispered me his concern at the prince's plight, and when "indeed all of us were pretty merry at the mimique tricks of Trinkilo", he might have smiled again at one of those "mimique tricks"! Thus I seem to have smoked out with my questions the working of a law. In comedy the interest is in the moment, not in the issue.

Having set down the law, I recognize that it was obvious, anyhow, that it could not have been otherwise. I realize in what different moods I have watched *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Rivals*. The "star-crossed lovers" are always under a shadow of catastrophe; they are "wedded to calamity"; their "violent delights" drive them straight to "violent ends". Romeo feels himself "fortune's fool"; knows he is but beginning "the woe others

must end". Juliet has an "ill-divining soul", and repines that "the Heavens should practise stratagems upon so soft a subject". Watching them, I foresee the end of their transient happiness. Pity and fear point me forward. What is this leading to? is my question. No such question troubles me at *The Rivals*. Captain Absolute, transparently her destined lover, courts Lydia; Sir Anthony blusters; Sir Lucius swaggers; Bob Acres feels his valor "oozing out as it were at the palms of [his] hands"; Mrs. Malaprop rages at a Lydia headstrong as an "allegory on the banks of the Nile". On this kaleidoscopic stage the present is everything, the morrow nothing. For these whimsical, self-seeking egoists I feel no pity, no fear, but only mirth, which has no eye to the future as fear has.

"Present mirth hath present laughter."

Thus, it seems to me that I see one of the chains that weighs on comedy, that costs it the freedom that the poet dreams. It faces a difficulty that tragedy does not know. Denied the power of interest through fear and apprehension, it cannot build steadily, inexorably to an end that binds the whole together. It cannot enrich its early crises with the sure meaning that the dark hour in the tomb of the Capulets gives to the waking love of the children of hot-blooded, feud-estranged houses, to their moments of abandon, to their forebodings in the midst of joy. It cannot weave such a web of fatality as enmeshes Macbeth. Its chain, seemingly gentler than that of tragedy, actually lays a heavier task upon it, the task of holding interest always, at every moment, by the values of the immediate situation.

There is an old comedy, long since banished from the stage, long praised by lovers of the Elizabethan dramatists, that carries out this task, I think, with especial cunning and apparent ease, giving the comic playwright his cue for keeping the law. Rare Ben's alchemist, Subtle, with Face and Dol Common as colleagues, sets up to gullible human nature a mirror, and dupes in turn half-a-dozen victims who seek a short road to wealth and love, to luck and position. When he has cozened them all to the king's taste, Lovewit, owner of the house which is his temple of tricks, turns up, and Subtle, planning in the exigency to

betray Face, betrayed by his own intended victim, makes an inglorious exit over the back fence. The point is that the situation shifts continually, that Dapper gives way to Drugger, and Drugger to Mammon, and Mammon to Ananias, and Ananias to Dame Pliant, and Dame Pliant to Surly, and Surly to Lovewit, in speedy alternation. Imagine Hamlet in such shifting sands! Jonson does what Molière and Sheridan and Congreve and all their kin do: he plots an action of many turns, of rapid ups and downs.

This begins to sound like freedom again. This seems no heavy task—to draw a succession of scenes, detached, each developing its own point and humor. This does not demand a view of the whole, the power that sees the tomb of the Capulets behind the moonlit balcony of Juliet, the battle at “high Dunsinane hill” behind the Thane of Cawdor’s death, the brawl in the Temple Garden, grown to a faction, sending “a thousand souls to death and deadly night”. But the illusion of freedom is transitory. Jonson and his brother-craftsmen must hold their audience to the end. If they have only detached and aimless scenes they have only wretched farce, only a poor pastime that may pall at any moment. They must, somehow, keep the hearers on the road, make them want to go to journey’s end. So they weave scenes one to another, keep them from being loose helter-skelter episodes by making them a series in cumulative complication. That sounds like a heavy enough chain, surely, and every comic playwright wears it. Mammon in the first act, played upon by Subtle with the stops of lust and avarice, is the Mammon of the fourth act, played upon to the same tune. But the tune is quickened; Dapper and Drugger and Ananias and Surly are all, in mind, to be reckoned with; the Alchemist’s jig is almost up. So the music grows more exciting in a thousand plots—here the pulse beats fast even in the region of pure comedy. No high pageants, no regal funerals may thread its streets, but behind its shutters are whisperings and disguises and hurried councils and many a dance that grows merry as fiddlers would play each other down. Joe Surface is tripped by his rope of sentiments, Falstaff caught by his own appointments, Bob Acres put to the duel by his own tongue. Difficulties gather fast; the lustful meet rebuffs, the

greedy and the loving bolts and bars; a smooth road to the goal of his desires opens before none; they weave a tangled web around themselves when they practise to deceive. Here is the entangling, the thickening complication, by which comedy holds its hearers through its rapid ups and downs, its shifting scenes.

Often, very often, there comes in this entangling a time of splendid wild uncertainty, when the whisperings are most agitated, the disguises most put to the touch, the councils most clamorous; when, in short, anything may happen, and so much is happening that no one has time to look beyond, around the corner. Who can forget those breathless moments when Lady Teazle is behind the screen, Falstaff under Herne's Oak, Bob on the field, Lovewit at the door, Mrs. Hardcastle lodged in the horse-pond? For these moments the plays exist; they blow away the dust of dullness and depression; they are the life, vivid, exciting, tense, not hysterical or overwrought, that beats high and happily in the veins of real comedy. If there must be law, let us be glad that it decrees these scenes of greatest complication: here, if anywhere, its despotism is benevolent.

But the pleasure of these moments has its price. They are the peaks of interest; beyond them the way lies downhill. In tragedy it is easier travelling. Grief is slow and reverencing; it will pause to pay the honors and pronounce the eulogies, to bear its Hamlet to the stage where—

". . . he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally."

But mirth is quick and fickle; once the fun is over there are no obsequies to make. Its Petruchio cries—

"'Twas I won the wager, though you hit the white;
And, being a winner, God give you good-night!"

Hence a parting law for comedy—it must be quickly wound up. No matter how short the ending after the point of greatest complication, it is too long; there the audience, breathing easily, is shuffling for hats or umbrellas, and thinking of suppers or soft beds.

But still there is a space that has had to be filled since Lady Teazle was discovered, since Falstaff was danced about. The

strands have had to be gathered together and the loose ends cut. And how often and how pleasantly in that disentangling a tableau is arranged for the curtain to fall on! The paths that have been separate find a cross-roads; the Josephs and the Backbites slink off, and there stand, grouped by a happy chance, lovers, relenting parents and admiring relatives. Julia is in Faulkland's arms and Lydia in Captain Absolute's; Marlow clasps Miss Hardcastle, and Hastings Miss Neville. I no longer need my companion's thoughts for my notebook: the curtain is going down.

Seriously, as I go out, I believe that Freytag has undone me. Here have I been trying to bind comedy hand and foot, to fix it with my locks and keys of phrase, to dictate that, since my interest in it is from moment to moment and not to final issue, it shall have an intrigue of cumulative complication through rapid ups and downs, reaching a point of greatest complication and being rapidly disentangled to a happy chance grouping for its final tableau. But, just as seriously, need I feel troubled at my gaoler's pose? Something seems to sing within these confines. I have been thinking about form, not spirit, and for spirit the theorist's laws do not a prison make, nor his iron rules a cage.

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